

# El Salvador-style “death squads” to be deployed by US against Iraq militants

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## Global Research Editorial Note

This article first published in The Times in early 2005 acknowledges Washington’s strategy of US sponsored death squadrons in Iraq. With John Negroponte now at the helm of the US intelligence apparatus, this strategy is now coming to fruition.

While the “death squadrons” were intended by the Bush administration to target “the leaders of Iraq’s insurgency”, they have been largely involved in the of killing of innocent civilians, with a view to creating conditions of ethnic strife and social conflict within Iraq. The El Salvador-style death squadrons have served to create a US sponsored “civil war”.

Global Research, 1 December 2006

*John Negroponte was in Honduras when American money was used to train Contras to fight Nicaragua’s Sandinista regime. (AL-RAYA/AP)*

THE Pentagon is considering forming hit squads of Kurdish and Shia fighters to target leaders of the Iraqi insurgency in a strategic shift borrowed from the American struggle against left-wing guerrillas in Central America 20 years ago.

Under the so-called “El Salvador option”, Iraqi and American forces would be sent to kill or kidnap insurgency leaders, even in Syria, where some are thought to shelter.

The plans are reported in this week’s Newsweek magazine as part of Pentagon efforts to get US forces in Iraq on to the front foot against an enemy that is apparently getting the better of them.

Iyad Allawi, the interim Iraqi Prime Minister, was said to be one of the most vigorous supporters of the plan.

The Pentagon declined to comment, but one insider told Newsweek: “What everyone agrees is that we can’t just go on as we are. We have to find a way to take the offensive against the insurgents. Right now, we are playing defence. And we are losing.”

Hit squads would be controversial and would probably be kept secret.

The experience of the so-called “death squads” in Central America remains raw for many even now and helped to sully the image of the United States in the region.

Then, the Reagan Administration funded and trained teams of nationalist forces to neutralise Salvadorean rebel leaders and sympathisers. Supporters credit the policy with calming the insurgency, although it left a bitter legacy and stirred anti-American sentiment.

John Negroponte, the US Ambassador in Baghdad, had a front-row seat at the time as Ambassador to Honduras from 1981-85.

Death squads were a brutal feature of Latin American politics of the time. In Argentina in the 1970s and Guatemala in the 1980s, soldiers wore uniform by day but used unmarked cars by night to kidnap and kill those hostile to the regime or their suspected sympathisers.

In the early 1980s President Reagan’s Administration funded and helped to train Nicaraguan contras based in Honduras with the aim of ousting Nicaragua’s Sandinista regime. The Contras were equipped using money from illegal American arms sales to Iran, a scandal that could have toppled Mr Reagan.

It was in El Salvador that the United States trained small units of local forces specifically to target rebels.

The thrust of the Pentagon proposal in Iraq, according to Newsweek, is to follow that model and direct US special forces teams to advise, support and train Kurdish Peshmerga fighters and Shia militiamen to target leaders of the Sunni insurgency.

It is unclear whether the main aim of the missions would be to assassinate the rebels or kidnap them and take them away for interrogation. Any mission in Syria would probably be undertaken by US Special Forces.

Nor is it clear who would take responsibility for such a programme — the Pentagon or the Central Intelligence Agency. Such covert operations have traditionally been run by the CIA at arm’s length from the administration in power, giving US officials the ability to deny knowledge of it.

The Pentagon refused to be drawn on the issue yesterday. “We don’t discuss specific future operations or specific tactics,” a spokeswoman said.

This week Gary Luck, a retired four-star general, will arrive in Iraq to review American policy in the country, looking particularly at the recruitment and training of Iraqi forces. The key to Washington’s exit strategy is the ability of Iraqi forces to take over security roles. The general has been asked by Donald Rumsfeld, the US Defence Secretary, to deliver an “open-ended” review of how US aims can better be met.

His visit comes after two weeks of increased violence in Iraq in which scores of Iraqis and more than a dozen Americans have been killed in the run-up to the country’s elections.

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